

Muhammad Irfan. *Institutional Barriers to Sustainable Urban Transport in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press. 2010. xxi+298 pages. Pak Rs 795. Hardbound.

The mayor of Bogota, Gustavo Petro, recently hit the headlines with his incisive comment, “A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It’s where the rich use public transportation.” This quip defines how policymakers around the world should look at the issue of urban transport, or rather sustainable urban transport. Rapid economic growth in the postwar period and high urbanisation combined with a greater need for mobility have escalated problems of congestion, noise and air pollution, and road accidents, necessitating a focus on the sustainability of urban transport. Pakistan finds itself at the crossroads where it has to balance the increasing demand for mobility with environmental concerns. This book by Muhammad Irfan is an opportune contribution.

Irfan describes sustainable transport as a “system of transport which has a lower impact on the environment, society, and economy... transport systems in which the share of active and collective modes of transport is higher and continues to rise as compared to private modes of transport (such as cars and motorcycles)”. He begins by reminiscing about his childhood in Wah (a small town near Islamabad), and his frequent journeys to Lahore where he witnessed active (walking and cycling) and collective (public transport) modes of transportation. However, he contends that the rapid growth in urban population in the last few decades has led to a decline in these modes of (sustainable) transportation. One reason for this trend is the decline in urban density and greater preference for living on the periphery (urban sprawl), which in turn leads to greater demand for mobility, congestion, and associated problems. Moreover, urban planners in Pakistan have attempted to resolve road congestion by designing bigger roads and highways on the lines of what is called the “predict and provide” method, with little regard for sustainability.

Irfan analyses the issue within the framework of ‘path dependency’, where the institutional framework within which policymakers make decision is a result of historical patterns of behaviour. He argues that urban transport policies cannot be studied independently of the institutional environment in which policymakers conduct their business, and that many best-practice sustainable urban transport systems have failed due to institutional barriers. Citing the example of the Lahore Ring Road project with regard to the path dependence of urban transport policies, Irfan focuses on two important components: (1) critical juncture, a point at which “events combine to develop a particular path”, and (2) the reinforcing period, when “supportive forces stabilise the path according to the selection developed earlier”.

Acknowledging the paucity of material on transport policy in the early years of development of Pakistan, the author resorts to five-year development plans and annual development plans to determine the relative importance given to different modes of transport. He describes the period from 1955 to 1960 as a crucial juncture, i.e., the period when transport policies changed in favour of road development. The historical approach to understanding institutional barriers focuses on the individual actors and social forces that have shaped a certain course of history. This book identifies international development institutions (the Harvard Advisory Group and foreign consultants) as the social force that paved the way for a transport policy favouring road building. At the

time, Pakistan had the option of either developing its existing rail network or building more roads. Irfan argues that the second course was taken because it was what international development institutions had advocated. To substantiate this, he quotes figures from various development plans—initially developed by the Harvard Advisory Group—to show that more funds were allocated to road development and that this increased its share in the total allocation for transport infrastructure over time.

Developing his argument, he states that when “a particular option is selected it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were available”. Institutional economics takes the well-known position that inefficient institutions persist due to path dependence; i.e., once inefficient institutions are adopted, it is very difficult to reverse that pattern owing to high costs and prevailing social structures. Irfan also demonstrates this point, showing that successive transport policies in Pakistan have favoured road development vis-à-vis other modes of transport (especially rail networks), and have ‘reinforced’ the initial path taken. Examining the Lahore Ring Road project—an ambitious infrastructure plan to ensure the smooth flow of traffic in Lahore—he documents the evolution of the project since its inception in 1965. The author concurs that the main purpose of the ring road was to provide a circumferential road connecting main arterial roads to the south and southwest of the city (the area with a higher urban density) to reduce congestion on these roads. The ring road was to be built bordering the periphery to ensure the free and fast movement of traffic, with no pedestrian access or parking. Conceived by foreign consultants and relying on the financial support of multilateral institutions (the World Bank and Asian Development Bank), it was based on the ‘predict and provide’ method of transport planning—a supply-driven approach—with little regard for the sustainable ‘demand management’ approach. Successive project developments retained this basic characteristic, proving Irfan’s assertion of the path dependency of transport policies in Pakistan.

The book is based on the author’s doctoral thesis. An advantage is that it provides a detailed history of the transport sector in Pakistan, which is otherwise poorly documented, and thus serves as an encyclopedia for anyone planning to work on this issue. For a casual reader, however, the plethora of information becomes cumbersome. Two shortcomings are clearly visible. First, in studying the path dependency of transport policies, it would have been interesting to know how developed countries managed to break away from unsustainable transport policies to more sustainable ones. Second, it would have added to readers’ interest had the author outlined a vision of how Pakistan might move toward such a desirable situation. Notwithstanding these gaps, the book is necessary reading for anyone with a research interest in Pakistan’s transport sector in particular and urban issues in general.

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